

BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY - TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

Chris Tzaros, from Birdlife Australia, drove through foul weather to give our members a most informative, enjoyable and inspiring presentation.

He describes himself as a bird watching ecologist, with photography providing a useful tool to record data for his work on threatened birds.

Photographers need a deep understanding of their subject to get good results. Such understanding helps to translate science into nature. Chris' background interest and ecology training, combined with an addiction to photography, enable him to produce the excellent photos he used to illustrate and explain his points.

The advent of, relatively cheap, digital cameras give lots of people the ability to take good bird and nature photos. "For a spare \$3-4,000 you can buy a good rig"

However, whatever your budget, spend the biggest part to buy the glass, the best lens you can, to give better results. An array of lenses if possible – a long (300mm or more focal length), medium (70-200mm) and short (24-105mm) and a 10-22mm wide angle lens for habitat photography. Depending on usage, prime lenses are sharper but cumbersome, heavy and harder to use than a single zoom lens (eg 100-400mm) that is more versatile.

The elements of a good photograph: lighting (exposure), composition and moment, are hard to put together. **Lighting (exposure)** is technically a function of shutter speed, light sensitivity and aperture. **Shutter speed** determines the length of light exposure. Fast speeds reduce camera shake and can prevent or capture motion blur. No impact if the camera and the subject are still but important if there is movement. Focusing on the body, the bird's legs may blur indicating movement that you may wish to capture. Shutter speed can be used in a creative sense. For birds generally the faster the better depending on light.

Light sensitivity the ISO, (with film used to be called ASA), of a digital camera's sensor affects the amount of light captured in the image. There is an ISO adjuster somewhere on every camera. Higher settings of ISO increase the shutter speed

but also introduces "noise" that looks like dust or granulation on the picture. Chris does not use above ISO 800 to keep the "noise" down. Chris recommends that you try it out.

Aperture, the size of the lens opening, f-stop or number, controls the amount of light entering the lens onto the digital sensor plate. It is the major determinant of exposure. The lower the number; the wider open the aperture. Shutter speed is lengthened as you increase f-stops.

How do you control exposure? Cameras have various modes. Automatic mode, creative control mode (eg sport, portrait), manual mode and two types of priority mode S(Tv), or A(Av) where you choose the aperture and the camera automatically selects the shutter speed. Chris photographs birds by choosing Av and ISO and letting the camera select exposure time.

The photographer can still control the overall exposure by exposure compensation where you manually, under or over expose (by changing from the camera's exposure equilibrium setting) for condition and subject. Where there are big tonal differences between the subject and the background you need to help the camera out with exposure compensation. Correct exposure is an "artistic" choice.

Natural light can be fun varying shooting from sun behind (usual), to backlight (using exposure compensation) or sidelight (eg low morning light) on the subject. The "golden hours" are the first and last couple of hours of the day especially in summer. "When the light ain't right use your own light source", that is use a flash. Full flash, on dull days or at night or in dense rainforest, to get colours in the birds. Flash when overcast, even light or on bright sunny days to eliminate deep shadows. Flash control and exposure need to be well controlled for the desired outcome even when it means more gear to carry.

When asked about possible detrimental (to the bird/owl) effects of using a flash he has not found or heard evidence that it causes a problem.

Composition: the subject versus the background; the influence of aperture on the depth of field. Low f-stop, gives narrow depth of field, increasing the f-stop will increase the depth in focus. Varying with the

situation, single or multiple birds, Chris illustrated f 5.6 (that he mostly uses) and f 6.3 showing the birds in sharp focus and the background indistinct. He always focuses on the face preferring that to be in sharp focus. The depth of field is determined by the relative distance of your subject to the background. Sometimes aperture alone is insufficient so increase the distance between the subject and the background if possible.

The position of the subject in the frame is important to consider even though you may crop later. A subjective assessment; subject not always in the centre. Eye contact of the bird, where it is looking, using varying head angles. Close isn't always best, habitat context can enhance the picture. "Get on their level"- wear shorts and jump in the swamp like Chris.

Field Techniques: stalking, nest vigils, sit and wait, call playback, and using a combination of these.

Stalking keep low, less like a human, crawl and slither, wear natural coloured clothing, go slow taking photos on the way and also watching through the view finder for the right moment when the bird may be calling, looking, stretching etc.

Nest vigils are very obtrusive and can lead predators to the nest. However you may capture additional aspects of bird biology and behaviour.

Sit and wait is one of the better ways to capture birds naturally. Temporary hides (eg cloth over your body and camera) increase chances of getting close images and reducing disturbance. However very time consuming.

Call playback (using an mp3 players and portable amplifier) can be very obtrusive if used incorrectly but can be very effective (bringing birds down from the canopy) if used correctly (for short time, out of the breeding season) with minimal impact. Also using a temporary hide. Weigh up your options in the field to give the best results with the least disturbance.

Know your subject – understand the behaviour of birds, understand their habits, think like a bird (bird brained?).

Processing and editing - develop, refine and practice an editing workflow. Software such as Adobe Photoshop can be a photographer's best friend. It enables you to make image adjustments such as cropping,

adjusting shadows/highlights, saturation (lighting) levels, sharpening etc and you can do more sophisticated work like "noise" reduction, clone out sticks, background blurring and red-eye removal.

In the end A lot of bird photography does come down to luck. Luck to just find the subject. You require an understanding of photographic principles. Good results can often be made better with editing. Buy the best lens you can afford. Back-up digital files and always carry spare memory cards and charged batteries in a safe waterproof place.

So much information, with clear explanation and illustration. Chris certainly assisted us in developing our passion for and abilities in bird photography. Thanks, Chris.

Alix Williams

Conservation photography is a term applied when an image is used to highlight a species or conservation issue; to educate people or to find out things through research.

Recommended website to view an 18 minute documentary

<http://www.ilcp.com/videos/witness-defining-conservation-photography>

SUMMER CAMP FALLS CREEK

Saturday Afternoon After lunch we travelled to the 'Ruined Castle', a 40 – 60 million year old basalt plug which had intruded the surrounding rock, in this case gneissic (=foliated or striated) granite of 500 million year age. The basalt plug had cooled underground so the process was slow, with the basalt shrinking in a regular fashion forming six sided columns. According to the signage at the site, uplift in of the area occurred about 1 million years ago forming the Bogong High Plains. Subsequent erosion has removed the overlying granite to expose the columns.

Our attention then turned to the plants, firstly to the twin-flowered Knawel, *Scleranthus biflorus* with its bright green dense mat. Close by was its relative, the Alpine Colobanth (*Colobanthus sp*) which also forms close packed clumps. Both species are members of the Family Caryophyllaceae. This clumping or cushioning is a characteristic of high altitude or latitude vegetation as it is

protection from the cold and wind. Many of the larger shrubs present here such as the Mountain Plum Pine (*Podocarpus lawrencei*) and a rock hugging Tree Violet (*Hymenanthera dentata*) present at this locality also have a dense habit with the crowded leaves preventing wind and snow from entering the interior of the plants thus keeping the warmth in. Snow forms an insulating blanket and protects from severe frost damage. Snow Gums growing together in clumps also for a hummock shape which helps deflect wind. Their leaves have a thick layer of wax and an antifreeze compound in the leaf cells to prevent freezing. Such measures may also protect them from the summer heat. Other plants have different strategies. The Yam Daisy has a thick storage root to survive the winter and sprout in the warmer weather. Another species of interest was a Clubmoss (*Lycopodium fastigatum*) with its yellow apical cones of sporangia.

At Pretty Valley Hut, our next stop we found the two varieties of *Olearia phlogopappa*, *O. phlogopappa* var. *flavescens* and *O. phlogopappa* var. *subrepanda*, the first having larger leaves and longer flower head stalks. There was a discussion as to whether we had found two species of *Pimelea* growing next to each other, one with deep red bracts covering the flower heads and the other with pompom heads about 2.5 cm in diameter. Ken H. pointed out it was the one species, *P. ligustrina* at different stages of flower development. A Veronica, *V. serpyllifolia* was thought to be an introduced species but the 'Flora of Victoria' comments that this species may include both native and naturalised specimens and those in the alpine area including the Bogong High Plains may be possibly native. Also near the hut was *Richea continentis*, a prickly epacrid and the smaller of the two Victorian *Richea* species. David Mules reported young Flame Robins, Silvereyes, White Browed Scrubwrens, Brown Thornbills, Grey Fantails and a Pied Kurrawong.

The final stop was at Mt McKay, 1842 meters high and the highest drivable point in Australia. Here we were well above the tree line and the hummocky vegetation looked as if it had been planted as a garden. Masses of *Craspedia* sp with the largest orange flower heads I have ever seen and *Olearia phlogopappa* contrasting with white flower

heads. The 360 degree view was awe inspiring. A lone Mountain Celery (*Aciphylla glacialis*) one of the few specimens of this species seen over the weekend grew here. As commented on in their 1998 book, Ian Fraser and Margaret McJannett as 'One of the plants which has suffered from cattle grazing. Even in Kosiuszko' (National Park where cattle grazing has been prohibited since the 1970s) 'recovery is not yet regarded as complete.' The sun was shining but the wind was very strong giving us a taste of what it would be like in a storm. A fitting end to a good day.

Jackie Tims

REPORT ON BUSINESS MEETING HELD 18.6.2012

General Meetings & Excursions

Friday 27 July: Winter Members' Night – open theme

Saturday 28 July: Crinigan Rd Bushland Reserve, Morwell. Meet 10am.

Friday 31 August: Tolerable Fire Intervals – Jean-Marc Porigneaux

Saturday 1 September: Sale Wetlands. Meet 10am Lake Guthridge, Sale (behind Police Stn) or carpool from Traralgon Mexican Restaurant 9.15.

Botany Group: Saturday 4 August: Cornwall's property, Thorpdale – visit and possible plant survey. Meet 10am at park in Thorpdale township. Contact: Wendy Savage ☎ 5634 2246

Bird Group: Tuesday 7 August: Traralgon South and Phelans property. Meet by 9.30 at Traralgon RRCR, Hickox Street. Thurs 16th TRU Wetlands survey. Meet by 9.30 at Morwell River gate. Contact: Alix Williams ☎ 5127 3393, alixw@spin.net.au

Finance – Balances: Cash Mgt Trading A/c \$4037.27. Club A/c \$330.77. Term Deposit \$12,000.00. Moved: We close club cheque account putting the \$330.77 in cash mgt trading account. D Mules/K Harris

Business Arising, Correspondence & General Business

Sound system – Shop where system bought gave Phil suggestions to improve our lapel microphone performance so will try this.

Latrobe Valley Naturalist

LVFNC Web page – David S has talked to John S and found out more about Yahoo 7 site. Need instructions for its use. Phil is preparing excursion writeups for some local reserves for John to put on web page.

Meeting room for general meeting – David S checked many Moe venues and none suitable. LCHS meeting room in Morwell (\$56, seats 50), Migrant Resource Centre Morwell (\$30, seats about 30), and Uniting Church Hall Newborough (\$50, seats 50+). Also Rose Garden meeting room, Morwell (possibly \$15/hour) could be suitable. Motion: That we take steps to book the Uniting Church Hall in Newborough for our general meeting room when required. K Smith/ D Mules

Club logo - Ken Smith has painted our club orchid and David S is working with Sharon Harrup to put it in text for a suitable logo on the sign at TRRCR.

Tammy Logan, WGCMA – request for information for regional river health strategy on colonial nesting sites and club involvement in waterways. Will ring and discuss.

Springsure Hill Landcare Group invitation to walk on Saturday 10 November to Sweetwater Creek track, which is off Beards Track, Shady Creek (2.6km up Beards Track from Old Sale Rd). Meet 10am for a 10.15 start and finish with BBQ lunch supplied by the Landcare Group at 12.30.

Traralgon South Flora Reserve interpretive signs – email from Sam Fenton with draft. Will forward to Ken Harris.

Botanic painting Exhibition at Arc in Yinnar by Two Kathryns. Opening 3pm 7 July, on until 30 July. Ken Smith has flyer.

Grand Strzelecki Track section Morwell NP to road 4 (Billy's Creek section) has been closed due to damage caused by rain.

Conservation Matters

Nothing to report.

GUEST SPEAKER FOR AUGUST

Jean-Marc Porigneaux has a Bachelor of Applied Science (Parks, Recreation & Heritage), and a Master of Science (Environmental GIS). His job title is Fire Planner (Ecology) with DSE, where he has been working for 7 years. His main roles are

to develop fire ecology assessments for landscape areas and also to undertake flora and fauna monitoring on selected planned burns. Jean-Marc's talk will be about Ecological Fire Planning that will include how we determine and use tolerable fire intervals in fire planning.

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

David Williamson from Moe – we wish you a long and happy association with the LVFNC.

FOR THE DIARY

SEANA Spring Camp in Bendigo area **17-20 August**, hosted by Bendigo FNC. Registration due by 20 July, but places may still be available as participants need to organize their own accommodation. Information available from Wendy, or email: info@bendigofnc.com.au

LVFNC Spring Camp at The Gurdies **5-7 October**. Accommodation at Grantville Lodge. Self-catered, BYO linen, blankets/sleeping bag and pillow. More details later.

PLEASE NOTE

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LVFNC BIRD SURVEY TRU WETLANDS

On 10th May the bird group carried out our three monthly bird survey of the TRU Wetlands near Morwell. It proved rather different from earlier surveys. For a start, we were told that a party of senior staff were being escorted around the area, starting at 10.30 and that we could not go in to the wetlands, until that visit was completed. We were also a very small party. Myself and David Stickney were the whole survey team, although our escort for the day was Denis Nagle, so we were effectively three observers.



We filled in an hour and half at Witt's Gully, doing a little bird (and

butterfly) watching until we could start our main objective in the wetlands. David was able to photograph this Meadow Argus butterfly (*Junonia villida*), still on the wing very late in the year.

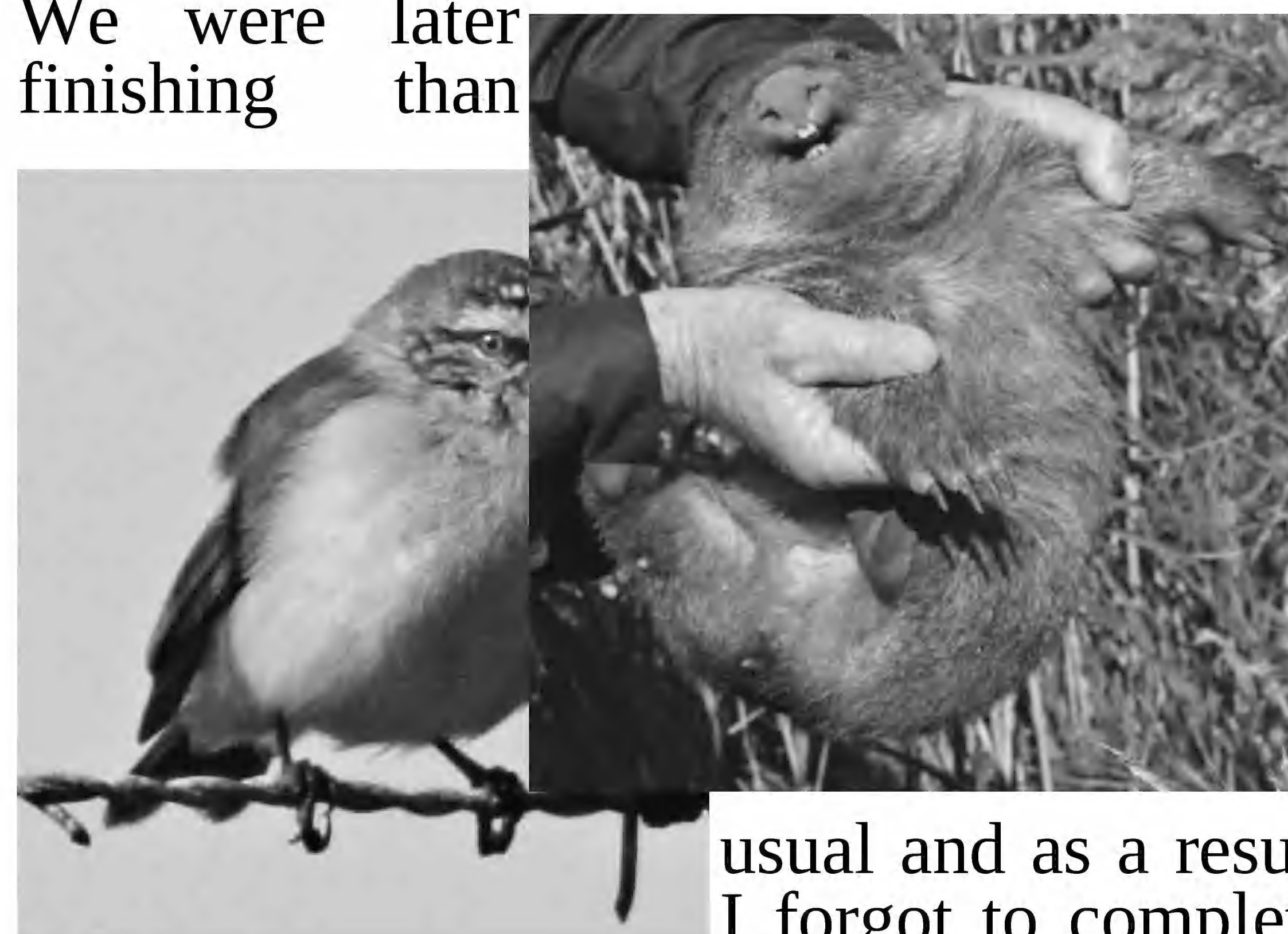
When we finally started our wetland survey, we followed our usual route. The upper level that we visited first had far fewer ducks than usual, but did include one Blue-winged Shoveller. Little Black Cormorants were in good numbers, we saw at least 8 and they were behaving strangely. They were moving rapidly about on the surface and frequently doing shallow plunge dives, shaking a spray of water of their heads and necks. While we were there a large flock of White-faced Herons flew overhead, making our total count of these to birds to 14, more than we usually see. There were also Darters present both on the upper and lower levels. As we traversed the ridge between the levels, a Peregrine Falcon flew overhead, undoubtedly the bird of the day! Further along the ridge we got a big surprise. A baby wombat barged into David Stickney's legs and disappeared down the bank to the upper level. A moment later a full-size wombat charged through our little party and disappeared down the other side of the ridge. We were still discussing this event, when the baby wombat charged into Denis Nagle's legs and he picked it up. It's cries brought its mother back on the scene, but I was able to get a picture before Denis let it go and mother and child disappeared down the bank together.

From the lookout point on the road, we checked the eagle's nest, but there was no sign of an eagle at the nest, although later a Wedge-tailed Eagle did fly past. On the other side of the road, we could see several Australian Pelicans, a Yellow-billed Spoonbill and a couple of Little Pied Cormorants. Duck numbers continued to be low, but the Blue-winged Shoveller was now accompanied by his mate.

At this point David Stickney had to leave us and Denis Nagle and I complete the walk along the lower levels without him. We were able to add a couple of Wood Duck and three Australian Shelduck to our list. Denis reported that he had heard at least two Shelduck calling. When we walked back we found 3 shelduck had landed on the same islet as the group of pelicans. We walked right out to the end of the track and I

commented that we had seen no Black-shouldered Kites, but that final meadow was the commonest place to see them, and there they were, two of them perched in the dead branches of a tree in the meadow.

We were later finishing than



usual and as a result I forgot to complete the survey by looking over the upper meadow from the road (which had been so productive 3 months earlier), but we did get a few more species on the way out. We saw several Flame Robins in the paddock beside the road and at the entrance was a small flock of Yellow-Rumped Thornbills, one of which posed for me on the barbed-wire fence.

Despite the low numbers of duck, we managed to locate 45 different species in our survey. A full bird list is available to anyone interested.

Ken Harris

HOORAY FOR ACACIA

Some time ago Bon Thompson told the Botany Group that there were moves afoot to divide the wattles into three separate genera. According to the 1997 Flora of Victoria Volume 3, most of Australia's 950 acacias (now thought to be more than 1000 out of the world's 1250) and all of the Victorian species, would be placed into a new genus, *Racosperma*. However name changes take a long time to work through the system of committees who decide these matters. In the 1700s Carolus Linnaeus popularised the binomial system of naming species of organisms (and minerals) so that any scholar who understood Latin, which was the universal language much as English is today, knew what was being described. A system grew up so that the first person to make a description of a plant or animal had the privilege of naming the species 'in ordinary circumstances' (see note).

The committees who decide such matter of great importance generally meet once every six years and in July last year in Melbourne, the Nomenclature Section during which decision are made on the naming of plants, was held in the week before the XV111 International Botanical Congress. At the University of Melbourne 200 experts in this area of botany debated over 5 days the rules governing how plants are to be named. Quite significant changes were made including for the first time, electronic publication of new plants is allowed rather than a hard copy and plant descriptions can be written in English, not just Latin. The following is a report of the other change.

“It has long been recognised, now with strong scientific evidence, that ‘acacias’ or ‘wattles’ include a number of separate evolutionary groups. Splitting a genus to name each different group separately is not hugely problematic, but the case of splitting *Acacia* resulted in passionate international debate. The issue has been: which group should retain the name *Acacia*? In Vienna in 2005, a decision was taken to conserve the name *Acacia* for the largest group, the Australian group. This was done by making the type species for the genus and Australian species, *A. penninervis*, instead of the original type of 1754, *A. scorpioides* (now *A. nilotica*), a species from Africa. Given the symbolism of acacias in Australia and Africa, this retypification was hotly contested both in public and botanical arenas, with the processes at the Vienna meeting challenged. The IBC meeting in Melbourne ratified the Vienna Code, and after further debate, a clear majority vote (including card votes from herbaria around the world) was for *Acacia* to be retained for the large Australian group. Although not everyone was happy, the consensus was that the processes taken were in order. The Melbourne meeting will go down in history!”(1)

I believe common sense prevailed. Hooray for an Australian *Acacia* I say – and rack off *Racosperma*!

Note. A highly entertaining chapter written by Stephen Jay Gould’s book entitled ‘Bully for Brontosaurus’ concerns a similar type of discussion about *Brontosaurus* really being *Apatosaurus*. The name ‘Brontosaurus’ as Gould points out is used in museums around the world, in popular dinosaur books and

films and is known by that name by millions of children and adults throughout the world as the largest dinosaur which existed. I have a copy of this book if anyone is interested.

1. Reprinted with permission from the School of Botany Annual Report 2011. The University of Melbourne

Jackie Tims

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